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AUTHOR Schraft, Carol M.
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ABSTRACT

There are three ways parents can be involved in school life: (1) parent change programs; (2) school change approach; and (3) parent organizations. The problem with parent change programs is that they operate on the naive assumption that children's problems are the result of their parents' inadequacies. They imply that the parent, rather than the school needs to be changed. The school change approach also presents problems. While many schools have provisions for parent participation in some aspect of governance or policymaking, systematic education about developing strategies of influence and power is rarely provided. Parent participation in organizations such as Title I mandated Parent Advisory Councils have not been too successful either. Such organizations are often marked by characteristics that keep parent participation at low levels. The Yale Child Study Center's school intervention program, however, has been successful in increasing parent participation in collaboration with a school development program at Martin Luther King School in New Haven. Some of the strategies employed at the King school, which serves a low income black community, included the development of a parent-staff organization, a parent stipend program, and providing parents with a major voice in school policy and decision making. (EB)

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Developing Parent Participation Programs in Schools

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Carol M. Schraft

All schools must now involve parents. Title I, special education money, and other funds on which school systems rely, mandate parent participation as a condition of funding.

Schools have involved parents in three basic ways. The first strategy and the one which social workers and other mental health workers are usually employed to carry out, is to change the parent's behavior in relationship to his own child. Individual and group counseling, discussion groups, and education for improved parenting programs are methods in this category. The second approach, and the one specified in funding mandates, is the involvement of parents in institutional decision-making. This is considered a school-change as contrasted with parent-change approach. Included here are Title I Parent Advisory Councils, the legal rights of parents under special education law, and parent participation on community boards. The third way parents are involved in schools is through parent organizations in support of the school such as the P.T.A., P.T.O., or Home-School Association.

I will begin by briefly describing parent-change programs, and then discuss issues related to a school-change approach in more detail. I will next

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describe the parent participation component of Child Study Center's school intervention program, in an elementary school serving a low income black community. This approach incorporates all three of the ways parents can be involved in school life mentioned above.

Education for Improved Parenting:

Mental health professionals are most often called on to help parents improve their childcaring skills. This approach focuses on changing parent attitudes and behavior through individual or family counseling, group discussion or therapy, or a parenting/child development course.

There is a mass of readily available advice on how to be a better parent. While much of the data are conflicting, the kinds of parenting behavior which lead to success in school have been documented repeatedly. Ira Gordon (1977) reviewed the major research, across culture on parenting behaviors related to school success. He found that:

> (The data) all show that the variables are not magical. They have to do with, among others, whether: 1) parents see themselves as teachers of their children; 2) they talk with them, not at them; 3) they take them to the libraries or the museums or the parks; 4) they sit around the dinner table and share and plan; 5) they listen; 6) they display a child's work on the refrigerator or the wall; 7) they themselves read and talk about what they read.

School based parent programs have utilized several methods to transmit this

kind of child care information. These include counseling, home-based parent-child programs like "Home-Start," and parent education courses such as "Parent Effectiveness Training." Many of these programs are extremely helpful to parents.

However, there is an important problem in employing these programs in schools. Often they operate on the rather naive assumption that the child's problems are the result of their parent's inadequacies. They imply that the parent, rather than the school needs to be changed. By focusing on the parent's failings, the school can be diverted from examining its own difficulties. This is a very common practice. Mental health professionals are frequently called upon to "shape up" deviant families to meet the standards of teachers and administrators. The question is rarely one of how the school can change its programs, rules, and customs to meet the needs of troubled families.

While education for improved parenting is important for all parents, social workers must recognize the special problems and limitations of a parent change approach, especially for families functioning under social and economic handicap, or who for other reasons are alienated from the school.

Participation in School Decision-making:

At the same time that schools offer programs to change parents, they are increasingly required to involve parents in the process of changing the school. This presents a new array of problems, particularly where there is fairly widespread alienation between the school and parents.

Many parents lack the social and political skills needed to make the school work to their own and their children's advantage. Skills required to successfully negotiate "the system" include a knowledge of bureaucratic organizations and how they operate, strategies of political influence, voting, budgeting, letter writing, decision-making, and parliamentary procedure. Schools do not usually provide any systematic opportunity for parents to learn these skills. While many school programs have specific provisions for parent participation in some aspect of governance or policymaking, systematic education about developing strategies of influence and power is rarely provided.

Much of what has passed for "parent participation" has, in fact, been "parent manipulation." Arnstein (1971); Hess (1969) and others have differentiated levels of parent participation in mainstream institutions. The range includes: placing parents on powerless rubber stamp "advisory" committees;

diverting parents from criticizing the institution by organizing institution enhancing activities such as school clean-ups in the absence of any substantive organizational change; and informing, consulting with or placating parents by giving them a token voice but no real authority about major programmatic decisions.

High levels of participation such as partnership, delegated power and community control, are distinguished by the fact that exercising them requires parent initiative and therefore some skill in dealing with institutions. As Arnstein notes, "since those who have power normally want to hang onto it, historically it has had to be wrested by the powerless rather than proffered by the powerful." (p. 84).

In public education, parent participation through Parent Advisory Councils has, since 1971, been mandated as part of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (E.S.E.A.). Title I was designed as a "compensatory" or deficit model enrichment program for low income children. There has been some confusion about the role of parents in Title I programs. On the one hand, the program operates to compensate for the inadequacies of the home. On the other hand, it mandates participation by the very parents designated as inadequate, in order to carry out program policies.

Davies (1978) surveyed parent participation in Title I programs nationwide. He reports that there are 60,000 Title I Parent Advisory Councils with about 900,000 members, and although this group represents the largest group of organized parents in the country, it has little power and little impact. The Stanford Research Institute report on Parent Involvement in Compensatory Education (1973) pointed to the lack of substantive, specific, and necessary roles for these groups. Title I groups are broad in scope, with vague guidelines, and most important, have no specific provisions for parents to learn how to be effective participants.

A particular conflict for professionals working with Title I and similar parent participation groups, is that the professional is a part of the very system (s)he is asking parents to reform. For this reason, most function to "sell" the parents on whatever it was the institution wanted to do in the first place.

All parents but especially parents who are alienated from the mainstream require a process of "political socialization." Frustrated and intimidated by the system, it is often hard for such parents to see how attending policy meetings and voting in public elections will readily change their lives. Mainstream institutions

such as schools often exploit the vulnerability of these parents rather than providing real opportunities for them to develop participation skills. Saliterman (1971), Davies (1978) and others have described ways that schools keep parents at low levels of participation. Such tactics include delaying and changing meetings, referring final decisions to other groups, failing to provide the supports such as transportation and child care which make participation of the poor possible, tabling items until a later date, and giving parents incomplete information or information in complicated legal jargon. When parents cannot keep pace with such machinations and stop coming to meetings, the school can say, "We tried to involve parents, but they weren't interested."

With parent participation in policy issues and decisions as an ultimate goal, we believe it more advantageous, in the long run, for school personnel and parents to begin their work together in neutral tasks rather than to start with complex or conflicted issues in which there are politics. By working together on events that are relatively free of conflict such as a school based pot luck supper, fashion show, or book fair, school people and parents can get to know one another, learn to respect each other, and eventually view themselves as participants in a collaborative enterprise rather than as factions in a

competitive powerplay. We have found that as teachers and parents work together in the ongoing routine of the school and classroom, they begin to see that many of their goals are not as far apart as the differences in race, age, or social and economic status might indicate.

While many teachers, social workers and principals say they would like to have an effective parent participation program, their efforts are often beset with diffeculties. We have found that a major source of resistance from the professional staff, especially in schools serving poor communities, is an unwillingness to make the necessary investment of professional time and skill to plan and develop a solid parent program. While the school may proclaim parent involvement to be as unalienable a virtue as motherhood and apple pie, the responsibility for actually organizing the parents program is given scant attention. All too commonly, a group of parents with few skills and little experience may try to start a parents organization. The school gives the parents their blessings, but little more. No one is designated to work with the parents on how to conduct a meeting, to plan events, develop publicity, and in a manner of speaking to learn how to become effective in collaborating with the school staff. If there is a leadership vacuum, the group is very likely to dissolve. Likewise,

the principal may announce the formation of a policy group, and invite parents to attend. Yet, in the absence of talking with parents about how the group will operate, over what issues it will realistically have jurisdiction, and the ways in which parents can participate in the decisions, it in unlikely that parents make a very real contribution or even that it makes sense to them to come to the meetings. Parents as collaborators, contributors and constructive critics of the schools cannot sustain their efforts and be effective unless they gain important satisfactions from these activities. The range of satisfactions include: evidence that their efforts improve their children's school experience, personal educational and/or career advancement, financial remuneration, an improved quality of life for their community and so on.

The primary condition for a successful parents program is that the principal, social worker, and teaching staff make parents a top priority for their own time and actions, rather than praising the virtues of participation on the one hand and bemoaning parent "lack of interest" on the other.

Yale Child Study Center Schools Program:

Yale Child Study Center has, since 1968, collaborated in a school development program with Martin Luther King School, a 350 student K-4 public school in an all

black section of New Haven. The program involved two schools for five years, during which time it was supported by the Ford Foundation. Since 1975, the Center for Minority Group Studies of the National Institute of Mental Health has supported a comprehensive parents program, the development of a social skills curriculum, and starting in 1977 a field test of the intervention process in a comparable elementary school. Ours is a preventative mental health approach which focuses on the complex network of relationships among all the players in school life, including administrators, teachers, support staff, children and parents. We are particularly concerned with developing a mutuality of purpose among school people, parents, and university staff. Recognizing that there is no "quick fix" to the grave and complicated problems of inner city schools, the choice was to develop long term strategies for institutional change through working closely with one or two schools. We chose this approach rather than a short run evaluation of any particular "innovation."

In our ten years at King, there has been a gradual neighborhood change from a population with a core of middle-income black families to a predominantly low income group with a disproportionately high number of transient and very troubled families. Yet, in 1969, King School ranked 32nd of the 33 New Haven

elementary schools on the Metropolitan Achievement Test in reading and math. There was a high student and teacher absentee rate, much conflict between children, between children and staff, and between parents and the school. In 1976 and 1977, with a population of many more poor and marginal families, King students who had been in the program two years or more, using the median, scored at grade level on the Metropolitan Achievement Test in reading and math. Including all students, they had the highest scores of any Title I school in the city. The school had the 3rd best citywide attendance in 1976 and the second best in 1977, a significant indicator of positive school climate. While there are, of course, many factors which account for the change, the involvement of parents and subsequent fusion of the school and its community has perhaps been the most significant.

Like many 1960's school intervention programs involving collaboration between mainstream institutions and poor black communities, this one had a disastrous first year. Conflicts about open education, race, and decision-making authority were but a few of the "issues" around which problems developed. Conflict erupted on all possible fronts, and perhaps most vocally from parents who resented their children being used as "guinea pigs" for a project from "downtown." Downtown was

the New Haven Public Schools, Yale, and others from "the system." Parents were angry with "the system," "the establishment," whose members enjoyed prestige, power and privilege without improving the quality of education, opportunities and conditions of life for people in poor and minority neighborhoods. The initial engagement with the parents was heated, potentially all-consuming, and destructive to the program, but also the potential energy source which made the program work. The very parents most involved in the initial fighting about whether or not Yale should be involved in their school, became the first parents to participate in child development and parenting programs, work on decision-making committees, and became involved in special projects as they were developed.

The struggle between parents and professionals, whether expressed actively or by the passive hostility of non-involvement, is not a <u>necessary</u> ingredient for successful parent participation in a school program, but it is <u>common</u>. A longer, closer period of pre-program collaboration and planning, better organization, and other situational factors might have prevented this struggle. The point here, however, is that the program leaders were willing to give and take with the parents; to understand their initially difficult and hostile ways of relating as their disappointment in and frustration with mainstream institutions rather

than as a personal attack or as a symptom of mental illness. They were willing to spend time on arduous, static debates that did not seem to be going anywhere. They were also willing to negotiate with the parents, and to make the necessary organizational and staffing changes necessary to stabilize the school. As a result, by the end of the second year, the school had moved from an unstable situation overburdened by "innovation" to an orderly albeit more traditional educational setting. Although in actuality, only a very few parents were involved in this process, the results were visible to the entire community. This small group of about 6 parents were involved in the school in two basic ways: as members of the school governing board and in workshops with staff.

As with most intervention programs of that era, parents were included on the Steering Committee or project governing board. While parents participated in program policy at various levels, one of their most concrete and visible contributions was participation in personnel selection. Principals, teachers and perspective staff members continuously commented on the fairness and wisdom of parents in these determinations. As parents became engaged in this task, and saw that their point of view would be given legitimate weight, the hostile energy was gradually converted into productive energy. During the summers,

parents and staff participated in workshops and school planning together. It was through these joint activities where parents, school staff and Child Study Center personnel, were all equal participants that the parties came to know each other as people, rather than as parents vs. professionals, or blacks vs. whites or Yale vs. school system. By engaging in these tasks together, common values and goals were recognized.

These events provided the foundation for a comprehensive parents program. However, it was not until the school had reached a level of reasonable stability - that is basic organization, child management, and curriculum strategies were in place - that professional energy could be directed towards a comprehensive parents program.

At the beginning of the fourth year, in 1971 the principal and community relations worker from the school staff and I as the social worker from the Child Study Center worked with the core group of six parents from the Steering Committee and the summer workshops, to develop programs for all the parents. To this end, the professional energy was largely directed towards the more stable, well integrated and most interested parents.

This is different than the clinical or deficit approach which concentrates on the school's most difficult families. We recognized that the school needed

both clinical and systems intervention. Our goal was to rearrange the balance between the two so that as the parent involvement program developed, it would in and of itself serve as a support system, thereby reducing the need for clinical service. In previous years, a large portion of Child Study Center and largely social work time was spent in intensive casework with a handful of troubled disorganized families. This was time-consuming work with little pay-off. The plan was to alleviate the need for casework by providing support through a wide range of parent recreational activities, educational programs, and concrete services such as babysitting and a clothing bank.

This required a different use of clinical skills. First, it meant providing the technical and organizational support for a basic parent-staff organization. The parents wanted to form an independent group which they called the Parent-Teacher Power Team. The group's name, the decision not to be part of the nationally affiliated P.T.A., and the experience of the organizing parents on the project steering committee, all supported the expectation of parents to have a major voice in school policy and decision-making.

However, these parents also wanted a traditional, respectable, mainstream kind of parents group. Parents talked about having a formal dinner dance, a

gospel choir concert, a pot luck supper, bake sales and the like. We recognized these as activities that could bring large numbers of previously alienated parents to the school in a friendly, neutral way.

It is not usually considered fashionable for clinicians to invest themselves in such "superfluous" activities as a fashion show, a dinner or a book fair. After all, relegating parents to the White Elephant booth is the very strategy utilized to keep middle status parents busy and out of the educator's hair. Many professionals see operating a parent's therapy group, parenting course, or high level policy group to be of more noble purpose and therefore a more appropriate use of their training and time. We believe that broad based activities such as those described above serve two vital functions. First, they are useful vehicles through which one can teach parents how to conduct a meeting, make decisions, plan events, develop publicity, and in a manner of speaking to learn how to become more effective in collaborating with the school staff.

The King parents developed increasing competence and organizational skill as they gained practice running their own group. For example, it took no less than 10 meetings to plan the Parent-Teacher Power Team's first family night dinner. One entire meeting was spent on the kind of paper goods to buy. A year later,

all the details of the pot luck suppers were worked out in less than an hour.

The second important purpose of these activities is their potential for stimulating school spirit, or a warm, caring school climate. What in fact differentiates the broad based activities of the Parent-Teacher Power Team from those of many traditional parent groups, is their intention in this regard. The purpose of these activities is to recruit parents who are afraid of the school, who feel intimidated by establishment professionals, and who often lead boring pleasureless lives. When these parents come into the school and find a warm and respectful welcome, their alienation from the mainstream is reduced. When parents come to the school regularly for positive reasons, they come to see themselves as important helpers in the educational process. Such parents are more likely to be responsive when there is a problem. This is an altogether different purpose than thinking up activities to keep the parents busy.

The formation of a broad based parents organization, and an active calendar of parent-staff-student events was recognized as the first level in a comprehensive parents program. The second level involved a strategy to integrate parents more fully into the day to day life of the school, in a way that would bring teachers and parents into a collaboration that would be highly visible to

the children. We realized that less parents could participate at this level than in the general activities. As we discussed this level of involvement with parents, and presented several feasible alternatives, they decided on an ongoing bi-monthly workshop series which they called "Coffee and Conversation Hours." All the parents in the school are invited to the Coffee and Conversation Hours through flyers, and phone calls. They have, over the years, covered virtually every aspect of elementary school curriculum, methods of effective parenting, and social, political and economic community issues.

The initial purpose of these meetings was for parents to familiarize themselves with school operations and curriculum. The teaching staff presented all of the workshops about the school. The parents requested the teachers rather than "outside experts." They wanted to get to know their own staff and internal program. This building of parent-staff relationships proved far more important than any given method or technique a curriculum specialist could have presented. The format of the Coffee Hours varied over the years. The first year, workshops were presented by grade level; later, much of this material was presented again by subject area. We developed a parent's guide to children's learning which included a schedule for classroom observation, questions for parents to ask

teachers at conferences, and suggestions for parents at home. Because the teaching staff was part of the process, they supported these activities, and provided much of the material for the guide.

Each year, several meetings are concerned with child development. The Parent-Teacher Power Team requests a group leader from Child Study Center with expertise around their particular concerns. These concerns cover a broad range of common concerns for all parents including discipline, sexuality, drugs, alcohol, the effects of television, habit disorders, and so forth. The point is that the programs are organized in response to parent requests, rather than as the considered opinion of professionals about what parents need. The parents are, however, consistently receptive to suggestions from both school and Child Study Center staff, and in fact look to the professional staff for ideas about format, organization and materials.

As parents became more and more confortable in the school, teachers encouraged them to volunteer in the classrooms. This started off on an irregular basis, around special events such as parties and trips. Eventually, several parents became effective classroom assistants and tutors. However, regular volunteer work was not usually feasible for King parents. Volunteerism is predicated on

the middle to upper class notion of excess time. Poor parents spend an inordinate amount of time on the most simple survival needs. For example, a routine visit at a private pediatrician may take an hour. The same exam at a crowded clinic may take the better part of a day. The realities of poverty caused many parents to place a priority on earning money over activities at the school. A small part-time job, or "keeping" children for a working neighbor, out of necessity, often took priority over volunteer work for King parents.

In response to this dilemna, we developed a program which would pay parents a small stipend for their regular participation in day to day school and classroom activities. This approach allowed parents to earn money in a relatively high status activity which brought them closer to education and enabled them to develop skills to help their children at home. As a rule of thumb, about 15 to 20 parents (or 10% of the parent population) are active in this program at any one time. It is program policy to find an activity for every parent wishing to participate, regardless of the parent's skill level. Parents have functioned as classroom assistants, tutors, cafeteria helpers, game leaders at recess, library aides, and clerical assistants. Parents are in the school building, and taking part in the educational program for children virtually every school

day. We believe it to be the best possible object lesson for the children in school-community relations. The parent stipend program has the additional advantage of vastly increasing the resources of the school at a limited cost. Many children have received daily tutorial sessions, individual and small group support from parents which would not be available otherwise. The cost of this program is less than $20,000 a year - the cost of one professional salary. The state of California, under the direction of Wilson Riles, has developed a similar program with Title I funds.

Parent participation in school governance is the third or most complex level of participation. By participating in the management of their own group, parents acquire organizational skills. By taking part in a wide variety of educational programs, and participating in day to day activities they learn about school operation, curriculum, and methods of better parenting. As parents participate in many varied ways, they become increasingly effective decision-makers. Thus, while only a few parents at any one time will be able to make the investment of time and energy required for participation in decision-making, those that do so operate from a sound knowledge base. A knowledge of the institution and how it functions, combined with competencies in basic organizational

strategies are the most important ingredients for successful parent participation in decision-making. Placing poor minority parents on a decision-making body without providing the underpinnings of a substantive parent program may increase parent alienation, and threaten the school administration and staff. This was a major cause of many early problems with our program and others like it.

At all levels, there is joint planning by staff and parents. Just as it is unfair to expect parents to participate in and endorse a program designed for them by school staff, so is it unfair to expect teachers and other professionals to capitulate to parent control. Thus, we advocate shared decision-making as contrasted with control by any one group, be they parents, staff, administration, or mental health professionals.

The philosophy of shared decision-making and shared responsibility, has facilitated a different view of clinical intervention. Rather than attributing problems to either the parents or the school staff, a "no-fault" policy developed. The emphasis is on changing everyone in the system to make the school more effective. In this atmosphere, even very troubled parents whose children are experiencing serious difficulty with the school have become more cooperative. Less time is wasted on broken appointments, blaming and recriminations, crises

and failure to follow through.

We have recently begun a field test of this process in another inner city school. We began quite differently than at King. This was a different community, different school staff, different social and political climate, and most important, ten years later in our own experience. Our approach was low-keyed, low profile, low on publicity, and far more realistic in promise. We have helped the school begin the development of a parent-staff organization, supported broad based activities initiated by staff and parents, and provided funds for a parent stipend program. That school too, is beginning to experience the promise and power brought by parents.

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